Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 21: Disabled Comedians

Guests: Danielle Perez and Maysoon Zayid

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[hip hop]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibiltiy Podcast with your host Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Heyyyy-yo! It's me, Alice Wong and welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media.

Disabled women are damn funny. I'm talking today with two disabled comedians Maysoon Zayid and Danielle Perez. You're going to hear about how they got started in comedy, the barriers they face doing stand up and in making it in the entertainment industry, what they find funny, and the role of comedians in resisting oppression.

Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

[plucky orchestral music]

ALICE: So, I wanna thank you, Danielle and Maysoon, for joining me on the podcast today.

DANIELLE PEREZ: My name is Danielle Perez. I am a bilateral, below the knee amputee. I use a wheelchair. And I do standup comedy in Los Angeles, California.

MAYSOON ZAYID: My name is Maysoon Zayid, and I'm not a joiner. So, I'm just gonna hang up on this podcast right now, if that's OK.

[music stops abruptly]

DANIELLE: [laughs]

ALICE: Aw! Geez, you guys. Trust me: I will be editing that out.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

MAYSOON: [laughs] No, you won't! Excuse me. I never agreed to be edited.

ALICE: Oh.

MAYSOON: Yeah. You didn’t ask. [laughs]

DANIELLE: Uh-oh, uh-oh. It’s all on the record!

ALICE: OK.

MAYSOON: This is live to tape. We’re doing it live! [chuckles]

ALICE: All right. We will go on. We’ll go with that. Hey, you know, I respect your, as a artist, I respect your take. OK, then!

[plucky music starts back up]

MAYSOON: I am a comedian, writer, disability advocate, actress, and tap dancer. And I'm on this podcast because…you told me to be, and I never, ever say no to you. Because you're the leader of the pack, and I just follow.

DANIELLE: Alice, you are the leader of the wolf pack, truly.

ALICE: Aw! Geez, you guys.

[upbeat piano music]

When did you know you wanted to be a performer?

ALICE: When did you both know that you wanted to be a comedian or performer or writer, artist? Did you always know it when you were a kid, or was it something that you kind of figured out later on in life?

MAYSOON: So, I've told this story a million times: My dream in life was to be on the daytime soap opera General Hospital. I was an absolute drama queen growing up. In college, I had designated weeping spots that were highly visible so that people could come and ask me, "What's wrong?" So, I had no idea that I was funny. None. I was drama! I was like, ready for my close-up on General Hospital.

So, I became a comedian because after graduating college, I was auditioning in New York City. I was getting a lot of work as an extra, but I wasn't getting cast in anything. And it became to me extremely obvious that I wasn't seeing people who looked like me on TV. Not just not seeing people with disabilities, but not seeing disabled people of color who are not the conventional ideal of beauty. And so, I decided to get into comedy because when I watched comedy, I saw people who looked like me. I saw Richard Pryor and Ellen and Whoopi Goldberg and Carol Burnet and all these people that didn't look like the perfect, you know, ideal woman that I was seeing on daytime soap operas. And that's how I got into comedy, but I had no idea I was funny.

[upbeat piano music]

DANIELLE: Growing up, I was very much I wanted to be an actress and a ballet dancer and musical theater and all of that. I took classes, and I had fun. And in high school, I was always cast in the chorus. So, it was very clear these are not real goals [laughing] and real, achievable dreams. Also, 'cause I grew up in Los Angeles. So, I knew people that went to the performing arts high school and had agents as teens and middle schoolers.

For me, performing was always something like, oh, that's like a fun thing that I enjoy doing. It's never gonna be serious. And then, it wasn't until three years ago that one of my best friends, she was trying to be an actress in Los Angeles, and her roommate was a comedian. So, we started going to a bunch of his shows. By the third one, I was like, I could do this. 'Cause of course, he was a straight, white, able-bodied male. [laughs]

ALICE: Ha ha!

DANIELLE: And I went to open mic and fell in love. And I was like, oh my god, I love comedy so much. It's my favorite thing in the world, and I never wanna not do it.

MAYSOON: I had extreme success from my third show as a comedian. It was ridiculous. I teach comedy now at Arizona State University and at NYU Abu Dhabi, and it's like, I have to teach them about the struggle and how you have to go to open mics and do five shows a week and eat ramen and whatever. I got hired on my third show. I've been a paid comic for the past 17 years, which is like—

DANIELLE: That's amazing.

MAYSOON: —unheard of, unheard of. And last year, I was the most-booked comic for my entire agency, William Morris Endeavor, which like a huge agency. But what's funny is the most-booked comic doesn't mean you're making the most money. I get booked a lot 'cause I'm like a cheap date. I'm like, "I'll go! Nobody wants to go. I'll go." [laughs]

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

ALICE: Well, you're definitely all over the place.

MAYSOON: I am.

[ethereal ambient music]

What are the challenges of making it in comedy?

ALICE: I follow you both on Twitter, and both of you are doing amazing work. It's a real hustle, and what are the challenges of breaking in and making it in comedy?

MAYSOON: So, I don't get to be a spoonie. I just don't. And when I first was introduced to the disability community by my friend Lawrence Carter-Long—

'Cause I was kind of isolated, and I made my bones in comedy being a female Muslim comic post 9/11 in New York City. I was a woman, I was doing comedy, I was a loud, proud Muslim, I was talking about George Bush, I was really edgy. And the fact that I was disabled didn't really play into my persona or my comedy or anything I was doing. Until I met Lawrence Carter-Long. And when I met Lawrence Carter-Long, he was like, "You're super ableist in your routines, and you need to come with me—"

DANIELLE: [laughs]

MAYSOON: Yeah. "So that I can fix you!" And the first thing I saw were these people talking about running out of spoons. And like, I have to tell you: I love my spoonie ohana very much, but that's not an option for me. I don't get to sell out Carnegie Hall or Gotham Comedy Club and be like, "You know what? I ran out of spoons at 3:00." I can't do that. It's not an option for me.

So, there are times where I'm really tired, or I'm in extreme pain, and I'm flying from you know, 70 degrees in Hollywood to 26 degrees in Belgium. And my body is just on fire, but it's a sacrifice that I make to get to where I'm going. And it's a choice that I make. But I can't be unrealistic and tell young comics or tell other performers that, "Oh, yeah! Totally! They're gonna accommodate you. And if you're just too tired for this scene, they can shoot that later." 'Cause that's just not the reality.

DANIELLE: Yeah.

MAYSOON: And I don't know if it can be the reality. And working on my—I'm developing a comedy series with Hazy Mills Productions—and I'm trying to make sure that I have disabled people on both sides of the camera and multiple representations of disability. But still being realistic about working in this framework, there's just no mercy, you know? And I wish there was, but there really isn't.

DANIELLE: I've only been doing comedy for three years, and it's Los Angeles, which is a relatively accessible city. But comedy happens in cool places, and cool places are never accessible. And I use a wheelchair. So, that means it's crawling into basements, it's crawling up multiple flights of stairs, it's trying to get on stages that have no ramps and are completely inaccessible. And if you don't go out every night to open mic, then no one cares. No one's gonna remember you. No one's gonna book you. There's so many people doing comedy, and just working in Los Angeles in Hollywood, that if you don't put yourself into people's faces and spaces, they're not gonna remember you, you know?

I'm independent. I live on my own. I drive; I get around. Even though I'm an amputee, and I use a wheelchair. I use kneepads, and I crawl up stairs. And I crawl down them and fight tooth and nail to just get on any stage that I can. But I went to New York. The first time I did comedy in New York, and no one really knew me. I got bookings, but it was very obvious from my tape and my bio I'm in a wheelchair, but it's fine. And there was one theater that the day of, I got a message from the booker.

And he was like, "So, the theater manager is not OK with us helping you with your wheelchair."

And I was like, "OK! No problem. I'll carry it down the stairs. I'm used to it. I can do it."

And he was like, "No. You're not understanding. They are not OK with you performing in this venue."

And it's like what the fuck is that? [laughs] Like, oh, I'm sorry. Now I'm crying in the middle of New York City 'cause I can't do a free, unpaid comedy show in an improv theater? OK. It's just kind of ridiculous. It would never happen in LA 'cause people know me out here, but even still, The Comedy Store is not accessible: The bathrooms, the Belly Room, the OR, it's a pain in the ass. [laughs] I hate it, and I do roast battle there regularly. But it's like, how much kicking and screaming do you make about that? So, then, you don't get booked, you know?

MAYSOON: You need to get, you need to email me the name of that venue because I'm gonna shut it down. No. You do get booked again, and this is a fear— Sorry.

DANIELLE: I mean, well, that's part of the fear. The only theater I know in Los Angeles since I started doing comedy that's taken it upon themselves to get a ramp is Meltdown. And I was really touched by that 'cause it's like, oh, they see that I'm serious about this, that I am doing comedy, and they're making an effort.

MAYSOON: So, what I've experienced in the comedy world is totally different than what I experienced in television. What I've experienced in the comedy world is I've had extensive conversation with clubs about the fact that I'm uncomfortable performing in spaces where my fans that have different, that are disabled and need different accessibility than I do, can't actually access the space. And I have had such interested club owners being like, "How do we do this? How do we fix this? How do we accommodate?" Being really open to me saying that. Meanwhile, when I was doing commentating on cable news, one of my favorite hosts mentioned one day that she couldn't have a wheelchair user on her show because the studio wasn't accessible.

DANIELLE: What?! That's crazy, though. You find a solution, though.

MAYSOON: Yeah. So, I tweeted publicly to them that I could provide them a ramp because I've been in this studio. I knew exactly what the issue was for wheelchairs. And there was like a $150 ramp that I could get, and I said, "I'm gonna buy it for you guys." They absolutely never booked me again.

ALICE: And I remember that incident.

MAYSOON: Yeah, you remember the incident. They never, ever put me on that channel again ever.

DANIELLE: That's crazy.

MAYSOON: Just because I deemed to say you can fix this so easily. This is a major network. You need to do this right now. They never booked me on the show again. Which is another topic that really aggravates me, which is this year, disability's been under siege, and we're nowhere to be seen on the news commentaries.

DANIELLE: No.

MAYSOON: It's interesting.

DANIELLE: It's only the pictures of us getting arrested that people share and care about, but it's like when actually having a real discussion about it and how it affects us and could affect potentially anyone because disability can happen to anyone at any time. Yeah. That's frustrating. I'm still very young in comedy, you know. I'm a baby in comedy, and it feels very scary to me to speak to clubs that I'm getting booked at. But still, to be like, "So, what's the accessibility solution?"

MAYSOON: Oh, you have to have the solution before you speak to them. And I understand that that's a lot of responsibility and that nobody wants that, but I walk through the fire so that the rest of you can. And Gerri Jewel walked through it before I ever did or limped through it or rolled through, whatever we prefer to call it. But when you call and say, "I need, and I don't have the solution," they're not gonna help you. Which is horrible. But when you call, and you say, "Here are the options. I am performing tonight. Which one do you think is most feasible?" So, you have to spoon-feed them what accessibility is, but when you do, most people are receptive. And then the world is the world, and you're always gonna get people who are just monsters, who are not gonna care. And so, I know of one club in New York City that just refuses to do the simplest thing to make it accessible even to me. I can't even get in this club. And they won't do anything for it, and they don't care. And they just want, you know, cisgendered, able-bodied white men on

their stage. And it is what it is. So, you also have to accept that the people who don't want us in the space don't deserve our power and our talent.

[ambient electronic music]

ALICE: And speaking of monsters, I wanna ask you—

MAYSOON: Donald Trump?

ALICE: Well, first I wanna—

MAYSOON: [laughs]

Topics, audience dynamics, and reactions to disabled comedians

ALICE: But I wanna talk about the audiences, and I wanna ask you both what topics you usually include in your standup? And also, what is the dynamic like with various audiences in reaction to your standup and in reaction to basically your bodies? I think so many people do not see disabled people enough in comedy, in all types of venues.

DANIELLE: I love performing. I have a good time. I mean, obviously, you bomb, and you are in front of audiences that don't get you or get your perspective or your humor or where you're coming from. But I mean, I feel pretty lucky that for the most part, I do well. I do a good job. I make people laugh. I definitely connect a lot more with women and gay men. If I could only ever perform for those people, I would! [laughs] But my jokes are about me and my body and my life and what I'm going through, and it's all from my perspective. I mean, the number one thing is to be funny, right? You're a comedian. Make them laugh. And so, that's what I try to do. And I'm usually pretty successful at that.

Every now and then, someone who is disabled or who has experienced some disability in their past or, you know, I also talk about my abortion and my rape and stuff like that. So, when women afterwards wanna connect with me about that after and hug me or tell me, "Oh my gosh. I really get that. I never thought I could laugh at that," that is incredible. And there's nothing like that. You realize that oh, it's more than just telling jokes, [chuckling] you know. You're actually touching people.

ALICE: Well, also, your comedy is grounded in your truth, and that there's a lot of power in that.

DANIELLE: Yeah.

ALICE: How about you, Maysoon?

MAYSOON: Yeah, I don't like touching people.

DANIELLE: [laughs]

MAYSOON: That's my, really, my number one thing. I really don't. And so, I live in two completely separate worlds. I'm an American comedian born and raised in New Jersey. But I'm also fluent in Arabic, and I'm a pioneer of standup comedy in the Arab world. And I think in the Arab world, it really falls into what you were saying, Alice, which is the idea that not a lot of people see a functional disabled human being in their lifetime over there. It's a different world. So, when I go onstage, number one, I show them the potential. But number two, I kind of make them confront that fear because I do do jokes about, you know, anyone can join the disability

club. We don't discriminate, you know. And kind of letting people know that it's nothing to fear, and there's humor in it and there's power in it and that our lives are worth living and that we're not better off dead. That's something that I do much more in the Arab world than I do here. But just like Danielle said, it's always comedy first, mercilessly comedy first. And I know that you guys that follow—anyone who follows me on Twitter knows—I walk the edge. I walk the edge of that sword all the time.

And when I started out my career— I like the fact that we have someone who's new and someone who's like a dinosaur.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

MAYSOON: When I started out my career, comedians used slurs all the time. So, if you saw videos of me from like 1999-2003, there was no one that was slurrier than me.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

MAYSOON: I slur from my CP, but I also used every derogatory word you could think of for minorities. And that was kind of who I was as a comic. I thought I was Andrew Dice Clay. I thought I was Eddie Murphy. And people would come up to me and like, "You're faking the disability. It's a bit, right?" Like, they would totally think that I was faking it. Post 9/11, everything changed because images of Arabs and Muslims in the media were so negative that for the first time, I realized the responsibility of my comedy and the power that I had to be live and uncensored and how much I could change people's perceptions. And then I started writing very political comedy, got away from and abandoned the slurs, and started doing more politics and also more personal stuff. I've always done like, I am a lover of a romantic comedy genre. I like sitcoms, I like movies, I like comedy series as a rom-com. And so, I started doing a lot of jokes about dating and getting married and my parents and my family, but also a lot of jokes about bigotry and discrimination and ableism. And all of that political stuff kind of seeped into my comedy when I became aware of the power that I had onstage. Now, Danielle said something so important for young comedians, and that's nobody bats 1,000. People bomb all the time. Except for me.

DANIELLE: [laughs]

MAYSOON: And so, I've never had that happen, and I'm terrified because I know it has to happen someday. And I've had such a long career that I can't even imagine what I would do if the audience was just like blankly staring at me. So, I face a lot of racism. I face a lot of bigotry. I face a lot, a lot, a lot of misogyny. And since July of 2015, I've been getting smatterings of death threats here and there with some of them actually being credible threats. I've been protested by armed militias who thought I was gonna impose Sharia law and so on and so forth. So, my world, as a disabled person who is aware of the fact that we're three times more likely to face violence, has been really quite terrifying for the past year. From healthcare being under siege to my physical body being under threat to just the anxiety that I get having a sexual predator in chief. And I have channeled that fear and that anger and that terror into my comedy, and I have to say, it's never been stronger. But when people ask me, "Has Donald Trump made you funnier? Does it make it easier?" I say—

DANIELLE: Oh, I hate that.

MAYSOON: I say no because it's not fun for me to constantly be anxious and in fear and disgusted. That's not fun for me.

DANIELLE: No.

MAYSOON: The fact that I can turn it into great comedy is a survival technique that I don't need to be doing on daily basis. I'd much rather go back to making fun of Barack's mom jeans.

[ambient electronic music]

The role of artists and comedians during a shitty dumpster fire time like right now

ALICE: It feels like it's been such a shitty year and that we need comedy more than ever. So, I wanna ask both of you, what's the role of artists, especially comedians, in terms of resisting, protesting, and also providing social commentary that we really need right now? Because let's face it, every day is a dumpster fire sometimes, and we feel these attacks as women, as women of color, as Muslims, as disabled women of color.

MAYSOON: So, I think that it goes back to what Danielle said and what I said: It still has to be funny first. You gotta be really, really careful not to go out there and be preachy. I find it very empowering that I have a platform like Twitter where I can kind of voice the important issues that are coming up and the calling out of this connery that's happening but that I don't have to do that onstage. And I wanna say that it's OK for comedians who don't wanna touch it, who don't want the responsibility. We can't force everyone to carry this burden. We call ourselves advocates because we choose to advocate. We can't expect every person to do that. And I get frustrated when I see disabled comics or disabled comedy series being attacked because they're not being socially responsible at the moment. Like, let people who wanna have fun, have fun. When it's their calling to be advocates, they will.

So, for me, I feel like this is a life and death situation and that I can't let it go. But I always say, how do I make this funny first? How do I attract people who don't care and get them to listen and think about something they never thought about? You know how I do that? I do that by doing jokes about being married to Chefugee or my cat, Beyoncé. Because these things are accessible to people. And when I get them into my sphere, and they start listening to me as a friend—which is what comics want; they want the audience to view them as a friend—then they'll listen to stuff they would never listen to. Like talking about Cruella DeVos and how she wants to roll back education and how I never thought I would be fighting for disabled education rights in the first world the way I did in the third world. I can make that into comedy and get them to listen when they would never read an article I post on Twitter. They would never listen to Chris Cuomo talk about it on *New Day*. Comedy allows people to listen to things they never would.

ALICE: How about you, Danielle?

DANIELLE: I definitely agree that comedy is a good gateway to get people to open up about ideas and politics that they would not, that they would maybe not be on board for otherwise. I've only been doing comedy three years. I'm barely learning how to walk in comedy. Do you know what I mean? Like, I still want to be as funny as possible, and for me, talking about policies and politicians and just the onslaught of this disaster administration and all the ways it's upsetting to me and hurting me and the people around me isn't funny yet. It's still, I'm very angry. I'm very saddened by it, and I don't wanna be preachy. You want someone who's gonna be preachy? Go to a rally. You know what I mean? I'm at a comedy show. And I think also too, a lot of people—I do—they want a break. They want a relief. They want to just laugh and have a night off because we're all dealing with this constantly, all the time.

I am a Latina, I'm a woman of color, I'm in a wheelchair, I'm disabled, and I'm onstage, but I'm telling you fucking pussy jokes? Like, hey, that's freedom! Right? I'm doing it! Sure, it may not be the most revolutionary thing, but when was the last time you saw a woman that looked like me have the floor and be able to say whatever she wants and own a room and make people laugh?

MAYSOON: And our mere existence is an act of resistance, which is why no one should be forced to, I said that carry that mantle. You understand? For someone like me, I look at it totally different than Danielle because again, I've been doing this for years. And like I said, when I started out, I was doing cerebral palsy tampon jokes, like shaky hand putting in tampons. You know what I mean? That was the level of comedy that I was doing when I started out. For me, I know that people want a break from Trump. I'm super-duper happy that other comedians are giving them that break, but I won't give them the break. And the reason I don't give them the break is because I have to live with that orange shit every single day. And if I have to live with it, you have to live with it too until we can non-violently remove the scourge from our lives. And for me, I just feel like still funny first! Still, like I said, telling jokes about Beyoncé the cat. But just saying you're not gonna leave this room without knowing I'm genuinely scared. And you can help me not be scared.

What makes you laugh?

ALICE: And there's something about comedy where it's so in your face, and it's so honest. I think that's really the power of comedy.

[upbeat piano music]

ALICE: What makes you laugh, and what do you find funny?

DANIELLE: [chuckles] *The Real Housewives* make me laugh. [laughs] Oh, I love overdramatic, ridiculous women fighting over petty things. Stupid things make me laugh, things that are vapid and inane and just, and stupid. I love it. I like having a mental break from the world at large, and if that's like a real housewife pulling off another real housewife's wig, then I will laugh at that. And it will be the best thing in the world. [laughs]

ALICE: How about you, Maysoon? What makes you laugh?

MAYSOON: Well, first of all, you know because you're on my Twitter a lot, you know I'm constantly threatening to flip tables like Teresa from *Real Housewives of New Jersey*. It's like my thing.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

MAYSOON: I flip tables and scream, "Jihad!" So, what makes me laugh? *Bob's Burgers, The Good Place, The Goldbergs*. I love *Smother*. I think Wendy is one of the most brilliant comedic actresses on earth. I love Lucille Ball. I love John Oliver and Lewis Black. Dave Chappelle is the most brilliant comic ever to walk the earth, and I don't care if my fave is problematic. I love George Carlin. My cat, Beyoncé, makes me laugh. My father was hysterically, hysterically funny, and he made me laugh all the time. I laugh at my own jokes.

DANIELLE: [laughs]

MAYSOON: Which is probably a really bad thing.

DANIELLE: No, it's OK. Comics of color are allowed to laugh at their own jokes. [laughs]

MAYSOON: I feel I laugh at my own jokes! My favorite contemporary comic is Joe DeRosa, which I'm sure disappoints the entire world.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

MAYSOON: But he's, because he's like a white dude, but he's also undercover Arab. I don't laugh at Trump. I find him upsetting. I don't think anything is funny about him. Even though I know how to create comedy based on him, I don't find him even in the slightest bit amusing. Because I find white supremacy and hatred and bigotry not funny even though I know how to mock them. And the reason that I mock them is because it takes away their power. But I don't find them amusing in any way, shape, or form. And I guess, let me think. I think, like, one of the things that cracks me up more than anything else is silly stuff on Twitter. You know, The Simpsons with the different bubble talking about something else. All those really silly, silly, basic cartoons and memes make me crack up. Anything Muppets. Anything Muppets makes me laugh. I love The Muppets, and I just— Oh! Oh! And the funniest show on all of television right now is *Schitt's Creek*.

DANIELLE: [chuckles]

ALICE: OK. Great. Well, Danielle, Maysoon, thank you so much for talking with me today. I'm really honored that you both shared this time.

MAYSOON: I need to plug my website! [laughs]

ALICE: Do it!

MAYSOON: Www.Maysoon.com. Maysoon is spelled like the month of May is coming soon: Maysoon. Maysoon.com. You can watch tons of content. I have a web series called Advice You Don't Want to Hear. It'll keep you up to date on my comedy series, If I Can Can, and all of my tour dates. So, visit Maysoon.com.

ALICE: How about you, Danielle?

DANIELLE: Follow me on Twitter and Instagram @DivaDelux, no "e" at the end. And add me on Facebook, Danielle Perez.

ALICE: Awesome. Thank you both so much today.

DANIELLE: Thank you! Thank you for having both of us, bringing us together. This was pretty cool.

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

You can also find links about Danielle and Maysoon on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening and see ya on the Internets! Bye!

♪ It's hard out here for a gimp ♪